

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

In the Matter of:

ALLISION WITH STATEN ISLAND
FERRY TERMINAL MAINTENANCE
PIER AT ST. GEORGE'S,
STATEN ISLAND, NEW YORK BY THE
FERRY ANDREW J. BARBERI on
OCTOBER 15, 2003

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DCA-04-MM-001

Tuesday,
October 21, 2003

Staten Island, NY

INTERVIEW

COMMANDER JOHN CAMERON

PRESENT:

ROB JONES, NTSB
STEVE MATTEI, NYPD
RICHARD GONZALEZ, USCG
BRIAN CLIFFORD, NYPD
JACK CALDERONE, FDNY

1 P R O C E E D I N G S

2 MR. JONES: This is NTSB interview. My name
3 is Rob Jones. This is an interview with Commander
4 Cameron of the U.S. Coast Guard, about the incident
5 with the Staten Island Ferry on October 15.

6 COMMANDER CAMERON: I am Commander John
7 Cameron, Chief of the Marine Safety Operations Division
8 at Coast Guard Activities, New York. I am responsible
9 for merchant vessel inspection, investigation, merchant
10 mariner licensing, push and response and marine
11 terminal inspection.

12 I have a very regular relationship with Pat
13 Ryan, who is the Operations Manager of the Staten
14 Island Ferries. He has my cell phone number programmed
15 in his phone. I have his cell phone number programmed
16 in mine. He routinely calls me about incidents on the
17 ferry, machinery, machinery going down, the occasional
18 hard bump at the slip, with the minor injury and what
19 not.

20 So, I got what I thought was going to be one
21 of those types of calls at, and I really wished I had
22 documented the times, but these are all from memory.
23 But, at approximately, between 15:25 and 15:30 on
24 Wednesday, I got my first call from Mr. Ryan and he
25 just told me at that time, he said, we had a pretty
26 hard whack at St. George, you know, and again, because

1 of the, you know, the normal kind of call with him, I
2 thought I knew what he was talking about. He said, but
3 this time there is some damage to the vessel, about 50
4 feet damage to the vessel. And that was, you know,
5 that was unusual. I mean, these, the way these, the
6 ferry slips are constructed, you know, they are
7 designed to not, you know, to absorb, to absorb the,
8 you know, the bumps for the boats.

9 So, I said, all right, thanks, Pat. I went
10 from my office, I was in the vicinity of my office
11 anyway when he called me on my cell phone and I walked
12 straight down to the Investigators' portion of my
13 division and I said, let's get a couple of guys up
14 there. And it turns out they were already dressing
15 out, gathering their stuff. I don't know how they
16 got, how they were notified, anyway. But, Chief
17 Warrant Officer Cobb was there, Commander Shetinsky(ph)
18 was there. And I don't remember exactly who else. I
19 think Lieutenant Hawkins.

20 I went from there straight down to the
21 Commanding Officers' office and I said, Captain,
22 Captain Bowen was in his office, I said, "Captain, did
23 you hear what was going on in the ferry?" And he said,
24 "Yeah, I just got a call to the CVO." And he said to
25 me, "You are going up there, this one sounds a little
26 worse than normal." And I said, "Yes, you are probably

1 right, sir, I will go."

2 I came upstairs, grabbed keys to a car and
3 went right back out. I noticed when I got on the
4 parking lot, that only a couple of the investigators
5 were getting in their car, and I said, hey, if you guys
6 want to ride with me, I am leaving right now. We can,
7 I think we need to get up there on this one. I put on
8 the news in the car, and heard that there was, was a
9 possible fatality, as I was going up Bay Street. I
10 called Pat on my cell phone and he said, yeah, looks
11 like we have got one DOA.

12 I drove pretty fast, I took some liberties
13 driving up there. I am pretty sure I got there by
14 16:45. And on the way --

15 MR. JONES: Sixteen forty five?

16 COMMANDER CAMERON: Fifteen forty-five, sorry,
17 15:45, thank you.

18 When I was only about a block away, actually
19 Pat called me again, this is the third conversation I
20 had with him. He called me again and said we have
21 multiple DOAs, four, five, maybe more. And I said, oh,
22 my God, Pat, what happened? He said it is pretty bad.

23 I went, drove down and parked, walked right
24 on to the ferry. I think, I saw Pat, and Joe Obamma,
25 the Commissioner of Ferries, and I believe Joe Ecock,
26 the senior captain for the Staten Island Ferries, all

1 right on the, I don't know if they were on the ramp or
2 on the deck of the vessel, but, in the slip certainly.
3 And one of them said to me, it is pretty bad over
4 there. And I said, all right, well, you know, we are
5 here anyway. And I walked onto the main deck and I
6 was, you know, I was just, it was just amazing the
7 destruction. I couldn't imagine what could have
8 protruded horizontally into the vessel with such
9 precise to take out all of that, you know, all of that
10 passenger area and also that, the vessel was still in
11 tact, the upper decks were still upper decks.

12 It was quite clear to me that, you know, from
13 a response standpoint, the fire department and the
14 police department had the situation in, you know, as
15 much of a controlled manner as they could. They were
16 shoring up, there were people coming out in stretchers.

17 So, I, you know, I didn't see a role for us to play,
18 you know, that I needed to engage in right there. You
19 know, my initial site safety survey, I was satisfied.

20 So, the next thing I did was I sought out the
21 captain, Captain Gansas, I went up to the bridge on the
22 slip end. And, you know, which was the original New
23 York end. Captain Gansas was standing in the bridge.

24 I think Joe Ecock was with him up there, so probably I
25 didn't run into him down on the ramp. Captain Gansas
26 was standing there. I remember, you know, I didn't know

1 him personally, so the first thing I did was look at
2 his shoulders, and he was wearing four stripes on his,
3 four bars on his shoulders, so that is how I know he
4 wasn't, and he was wearing a white shirt, black tie,
5 black pants. So that is how I knew he wasn't wearing a
6 jacket. And we introduced ourselves and I said what
7 happened? What happened, Captain, can you tell me what
8 happened? And he said, and you know, again, I wish
9 had the exact words down, because, you know, this may
10 or may not be relevant now, but, my interpretation of
11 what he said, was that he was on bridge as the vessel
12 was making its approach to Staten Island. He was back
13 by the settee and Smith was on the controls, up
14 forward, which is a normal, you know, it is normal,
15 normally when I am on the bridge, when they are
16 operating, there is a guy on the controls and there is
17 somebody else just sitting back on the settee, not
18 really paying attention. He said, to me, at some
19 point, he realized that Smith wasn't, Smith wasn't, and
20 again I am trying to remember the words he used, was
21 standing there but wasn't really, you know, just wasn't
22 doing anything. He was just looking straight ahead.
23 And he realized that they were, you know, they had
24 missed, they had missed the turn and missed slowing
25 down. And he went over to him and shook him and Rich,
26 Rich, are you all right, are you all right, and then

1 there was the collision.

2 And I said, okay, where is Smith now? And he
3 said, he fled. He ran when we got into the slip. And
4 I said, all right, what did you do then? And he said,
5 I got the, I got the boat into the slip, and, you know,
6 basically, I mean, backed it in and brought the New
7 York end into the slip. He looked, you know, he didn't
8 look like he was injured to me at all. I told him to
9 stay right here. Our investigators will be onboard
10 soon. And our investigators were led by Chief Warrant
11 Officer Cobb. And there were several others with him,
12 Lieutenant VanMay, Lieutenant Gonzalez here. A team
13 of inspectors came aboard as well. Led by our civilian
14 GS-3, Jim Castello(ph), and he had Jay Jerome and Joe
15 Lally with him and there were a few others. Lieutenant
16 Colonel Hawkins arrived shortly after that. He is our
17 senior investigating officer, assistant senior
18 investigating officer, actually, I am sorry.

19 So, I got Hawkins and Castello together and I
20 said, all right, there are three distinct things I want
21 to happen. We need, we need, we need safety
22 assessment, the damage assessment of the vessel. Jim,
23 you get a team of inspectors, comb through the
24 structure everywhere, you know, make sure that the fire
25 department is shoring up what needs to be shored up.
26 They are shoring on solid structure. That the hull is

1 in tact. You know, those kinds of damage and safety
2 assessments. And then for Hawkins, I said, I want the
3 investigation to be broken up into two, two distinct
4 groups. I want one group to document the, document the
5 damage, collect physical evidence, document the
6 physical evidence. And another team I want to work on
7 interviews.

8 The next thing I did was I went and found a
9 two star in the police force and asked him if they were
10 aware that Smith had fled and that we had an interest
11 in finding him and he said, oh, don't worry, we are on
12 it. We are combing the whole borough looking for him.

13 I again called Captain Bowen, and I think we
14 are still on the, we were within the first 20 minutes
15 of me being onboard here still. And I called Captain
16 Bowen and said, Captain, you are probably want to come
17 here, this is, this is a very serious incident. The
18 damage is a lot more extensive than 50 feet. It is
19 about 250 feet. It is about 80 percent of the length
20 of the vessel. And I got, I had gotten a report by, I
21 think, by that same two star police officer, that they
22 were as many as 15 fatalities. And I told Captain
23 Bowen that. And he said, okay, great, well, not
24 great, but he said, okay, I will be right up there.

25 And then I made a point to circulating
26 through, throughout the vessel, finding the senior

1 people that I could from each agency, OEM, police,
2 fire, police harbor. I found the command post, you
3 know, told them what, you know, what the Coast Guard is
4 doing there. There are three distinct functions that I
5 had ordered, you know, that I was there. I called back
6 to the office, asking them to bring radios up, because
7 cell phone coverage was very poor. We were having a
8 hard time communicating.

9 The, one of the issues I was dealing with,
10 the police were very meticulous about controlling
11 access to the ferry, which, you know, is a good thing,
12 but the police officers were keeping the Coast Guard
13 people off the ferry. Which I understand why they
14 were doing it, but, you know, it was a little bit
15 problematic for us. Every time I went to a senior
16 police officer and, you know, asked for them to, you
17 know, to allow us onboard, it happened, but it was an
18 additional step in the process every time we wanted to
19 get somebody on and off the ship.

20 The CO, the Commanding Officer did arrive
21 about just, just a little bit after Mr. Odmatt(ph) from
22 OEM arrived, the OEM Commissioner, DOT Commissioner
23 Wineshawl(ph) arrived around then. Those senior folks
24 went into a container and conducted the briefings and
25 what not. We, you know, my staff continued to do what
26 they, you know, what they have been directed to do.

1 They were working with the police department and
2 documenting the scene, taking photographs. They
3 eventually moved the interviews up to the precinct and
4 continued to interview the crew, along side the police
5 department.

6 Safety onboard, I became concerned that the,
7 I realized eventually that there was no crew of the
8 ferry onboard the ferry. The police had kept them off.

9 Again, for, you know, for the right reason, but, the
10 moorings, the mooring lines were getting slack. I
11 think as the tide was coming up, the vessel was getting
12 a little sloppy in the slip. So, I went and found the
13 senior captain, and said, hey, you need somebody to
14 tend lines. He said, I would love to, but, I can't get
15 on my ship. So, I asked the police department to
16 provide access to a limited number of crew, who came
17 aboard, put some more lines out. It was, there was
18 constant debate about the tug on the aft end of the
19 ferry. I kept hearing from people that I had ordered
20 this and that, when I really ordered nothing. The tug
21 was there to, you know, to hold the vessel in the slip,
22 but I asked Captain Ecock, I said, now you have got
23 more lines out, you know, that tug back there, I am, it
24 is up to you whether you keep it there or not. The
25 police, Lieutenant Church from the Harbor Unit said,
26 yeah, we would like to dive for survivors around here,

1 but, we don't, we can dive while the tug is clutched
2 in. And I said, that is fine, I don't need that tug to
3 be there if, you know, the ferry management thinks they
4 need the tug to be able to keep the vessel in, you need
5 to work with them on that.

6 But, you know, the Coast Guard's opinion on
7 whether that tug stays there or not is not, you know,
8 we have no opinion either way.

9 You know, those kind of communication issues
10 are, I mean, they are going to happen in incidents like
11 that. So, that is the role I fulfil largely.

12 And NTSB responder, Luke Cheeotto(ph)
13 arrived, somewhere into the evening, a little bit after
14 dark. I brought him through, explained to him, you
15 know, what he was seeing, you know, what we knew then
16 about, you know, what had impacted and cut the pier and
17 what not, who we talked to, what we were doing. Then
18 NTSB Chairwoman showed up a little while later,
19 conducted pretty much the same brief with her. And
20 by, by about midnight, we had been relieved of the
21 investigation by the NTSB and set up our, you know, our
22 liaison roles, like we have now with the NTSB.

23 The, you know, the victims and the injured
24 and so forth, had all been removed long ago. We set up
25 an overnight watch of two lieutenants, I believe it
26 was. And VanMay -- I think, right, Rich?

1 MR. GONZALEZ: It was VanMay and Olsen, sir.

2 COMMANDER CAMERON: Okay. Lieutenant and

3 Lieutenant JG. And we secured it with the exception

4 of those two folks, right around midnight.

5 (End of interview.)